

# Tough times for riverside mill

*Drought, high water,  
high winds battered  
Springs plantations*

Richard Austin Springs had a plantation he called Springsteen that nowadays is the site of Rock Hill's Galleria area.

In 1849, there was no Rock Hill. The CC&A railroad was under construction and the depots that would create Rock Hill and Fort Mill were not yet built. Richard Springs' brother, Andrew Baxter Springs, was in charge of his father's plantation, called Springfield, north of Fort Mill.

On Sept. 20, 1849, Richard Springs wrote his brother, Baxter, then at the home of his wife's family near Marietta, Ga.: "The Catawba is as low as I have ever seen it. It will be seven weeks Saturday since we had rain. We had to work on our dam yesterday to keep the Mill a-going."

The grist mill was jointly owned by John Springs III (father of Richard and Baxter) and William White.

Richard Springs had the contract from the railroad to furnish labor to build the roadbed on the west side of the Catawba. White had the contract for the east side through his lands and then the contract was Baxter Springs' to build on to the N.C. boundary line.

Richard Springs consoled himself with the observation that, though he had lost most of his crops to the dry weather, the em-

## COMMENTARY

Louise  
Pettus



ployment of the slaves by the railroad enabled him to feed them. His neighbors were not so lucky.

Nearly a year later, on Aug. 28, 1850, Wylie Glover, overseer for Baxter Springs, wrote Springs, who was again visiting his wife's family in Georgia, that, "(We) have just begun pulling of fodder and ... it is hard to tell which way to begin when you go into the fields to pull fodder for we have had one of the severest winds and rain that I ever witnessed for it has blown the corn in every direction and has split the fodder all to pieces so it is hardly worth pulling ... The river was higher than I have ever seen it in many a day ... The water was up to the Mill windows at the Nation Ford ... I am afraid that a good deal of our corn will rot for it is blown down so much. ... There is great complaint about Sugar Creek and the river injuring the corn."

Three days later Richard wrote Baxter that "in some places the wind was so strong as to blow down houses. On the 26th Monday the river rose within three feet of the height it attained at the time of the Great May Fresh in 1840 which was thought to be between 22 and 25 feet above common water. Monday morning a Mill House ... passed down the river and some wheels running after as if determined to keep company." His reference to "fresh" was short for "freshet." a

common 19th century term for a flood.

Richard's letter can only remind us of Hurricane Hugo. No doubt a hurricane, like Hugo, had come inland.

There would have been no warning system in 1850, therefore no preparation for the storm that bore no name. Also, there was no newspaper in York County to report the damage done.

Richard wrote that he saddled up his mare and set out to inspect the damage. He had great difficulty crossing the branches and had to force the mare to swim across several streams before he could reach the mill, which he found still standing.

He had lost most of his corn crop and supposed that it would soon be like another such disaster: "One year I had some corn flooded in the roasting ear state that smelt so bad that the buzzards collected to it."

It was a rural society and more than 90 percent of the S.C. Up-country was dependent on farm production in 1850.

When weather-related disasters hit, small farmers often sold their holdings if they could (at rock-bottom prices) and went West.

Large slave-holders such as the Springses and Whites had more options.

They might buy additional slaves at lower prices than usual or they might rent slaves in the hopes for a better season.

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.